

The Sunday after the Ascension

St. John 15:26-16:4: "Are You Ready for What Is Coming?"

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In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them and who rules over every earthly authority and power, look upon the threats of the wicked, all those who would ruin and destroy the work of Your kingdom among us. Grant that we may cling firmly to Your Word of truth and believe the glad tidings of Your salvation. Through Your Word and Sacraments, give us the courage to speak the truth with boldness, so that more may hear and learn of Your great love and mercy. We ask it in the name of Your holy Servant Jesus. Amen. (derived from Acts 4:24-30)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning. / "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor Me. / "But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you. I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, our risen and ascended Lord who continues to prepare us and strengthen us for coming trials and troubles through His holy means of grace, dear fellow redeemed:

The night before His death, Jesus told His disciples that He was going away. He told them He was returning to the Father. At the time, they didn't understand what this meant. They didn't see why He should have to die and rise again and ascend into heaven. And now all these things had taken place. Jesus had gone away. He had ascended to the right hand of His Father. Now what?

Jesus had prepared them for this too. He said that a Helper would come from God the Father and God the Son. This Helper is the Spirit of Truth, God the Holy Spirit. He would come to teach the disciples all things and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus told them (Joh. 14:26). He would come to guide them into all the truth of God (16:13) and glorify the Son through this Gospel teaching.

Along with the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus told His disciples He was sending them to proclaim salvation to all nations (Mat. 28:19-20, Mar. 16:15-16, Luk. 24:47). They were witnesses

of His mighty words and actions during the three years of His public work, and they saw Him alive again after His death on the cross (Luk. 24:46-48). They would tell the whole world what Jesus had done to save sinners, so that more and more would repent and believe.

Jesus promised these things before His ascension and now He had gone, but nothing had happened yet. The disciples knew it wouldn't be long. Jesus ordered them to *"stay in [Jerusalem] until [they were] clothed with power from on high"* (Luk. 24:49). So the disciples waited. But they were not idle.

The evangelist Luke writes that they *"returned to Jerusalem with great joy"* (v. 52). *"[W]ith one accord,"* they *"were devoting themselves to prayer,"* and they *"were continually in the temple blessing God"* (Act. 1:14, Luk. 24:53). That's a far cry from the terror they felt when Jesus was crucified. Then they hid together in an out of the way place, worrying that Jesus' enemies would come for them next. But now they were *"continually in the temple"* – out in the open, no longer afraid.

How could the disciples not be afraid? Jesus had warned them that because He chose them out of the world, therefore the world hated them (Joh. 15:19). And, *"If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you"* (v. 20). In today's text, He told them, *"They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."*

If you were in their shoes, would you be afraid? There are a lot of things that scare us, and death is near the top of the list. But can you think of anything you might fear more than death? In other words, is there anything you would be willing to die for? Jesus' disciples believed there was. They were willing to die for the truth. They were willing to die for Jesus. They were willing to do this because they now understood what He came to do for them. They realized that He died and rose again to save them and all sinners.

Nothing would be worse than to lose Jesus, to lose their Lord and Savior. They feared that more than anything. Even when Peter and John were brought before the very men who conspired to kill Jesus, they declared, *"we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard"* (Act. 4:20). We must tell the truth, they said, even if it results in our death.

That sounds simple, but it isn't so simple in practice. We like to think we would respond heroically if someone ordered us to deny Jesus or die. We can picture ourselves defiantly speaking the truth. But what if the stakes were higher than your own life? What if the lives of the people you love the most were threatened? Would you deny Jesus to save their lives?

Hard questions like these are the reason Jesus warned His disciples in advance about trials. He wanted them to be ready for the difficult times to come. He said that these troubles would continue until His return on the last day: *"[T]hey will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death,"* He said at another point, *"and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved"* (Mat. 24:9-13).

"[T]he one who endures to the end will be saved," He says. But how can we endure under such troubling circumstances? As much as we like to imagine ourselves as brave and bold, it is not

hard to think of times when we let our fears get the best of us. When the truth was needed, we went along with the lie. When God called us to stand out, we tried our best to fit in. When a fellow Christian needed support, we hid ourselves away.

In this, we have something in common with Jesus' disciples. They fled when Jesus was arrested. Later that same night when Peter thought his life was in danger, he denied even knowing Jesus. And all the disciples huddled together in fear. How did those timid men become so courageous? It was not by the strength of their faith or the strength of their own will. It was by the strength that God supplied them. He supplies the same strength to you.

A soldier on the battlefield gains physical strength from good food and drink. And when the battle is raging, he is strengthened by encouraging words from his superior, "Hold your ground! Take courage! Fight!" The same goes for the spiritual battle in which we are engaged. Jesus strengthens us with the nourishing food and drink of His own body and blood. And He strengthens us by filling our ears with inspired words. That's how He prepared those first disciples for the conflict, and it is how He prepares us.

Just because Jesus ascended into heaven visibly, does not mean He is no longer with us. He still works among us and in us. He is with us always through His powerful means of grace. Wherever His Gospel message of salvation is proclaimed, He is present, right here and now, delivering His gifts.

And "*the Helper*" is with Him, the Holy Spirit, who bears witness about Him. The Holy Spirit confirms the truth of Jesus' saving work in our heart and mind. He brings us faith to believe that Jesus' death on the cross was for our sins, and that His resurrection from the dead was the victory over our death.

The continued presence of Jesus through His Word and Sacraments, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit through those same powerful means, explains the disciples' new-found courage. This is why they were ready for the difficulties they faced. This is why they did not fear death. This is why when they were beaten for preaching the Gospel, they rejoiced "*that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus]*" (Act. 5:41).

You may be unsure if you are ready for this kind of suffering. And if you try to draw from some kind of strength and courage inside you or rely on preparations you have made, you will continue to doubt. God is the one who prepares you. He gets you battle-ready. Through Holy Baptism, He imparts the certain hope that His armor is covering you and that He will not leave your side in the battle. Through Holy Communion, He gives you the confidence that your strength will not fail, because He is in you to fight for you. And through the preaching of His Word, He gives you the courage of knowing that nothing can separate you from His love and mercy.

When the Lord gives you such hope and confidence and courage, then you are ready to suffer all things for the sake of His name and truth. You do not know what you will have to face in the future. You don't know how the devil, the world, and your own flesh will conspire to destroy your faith. But you do know that the Lord is with you.

The disciples knew that too. Jesus was no longer visibly present, but He was still with them. They were not alone. They were not forgotten. You are not alone. You are not forgotten. Your Savior is preparing you even now for the trials and difficulties that lie ahead. He will not leave you to fend for yourself. He will strengthen you, and He will keep you in His constant care.

And at some point when the days He has numbered for you have all been counted, He will give you eternal relief from your current struggle here on earth. He will call your soul to His realm of glory and will let your body be laid to rest. Then finally the day will come that He has prepared, the day of ultimate victory, when He will return visibly with great power and will put an end to all conflict. Then in the flesh, made whole again and glorified, you will enter into the never-ending peace and gladness of the Father's kingdom.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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